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Senate approves measure to normalize trade with Laos

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WASHINGTON, D.C. -- The Senate passed legislation on Friday normalizing trade relations with Laos, a move that has the Bush administration's backing, but which has bitterly divided the Hmong community in the United States.

Senators Mark Dayton and Norm Coleman of Minnesota, with the nation's largest concentration of Laotian Hmong immigrants, voted against the measure in a voice vote. Coleman, a Republican, immediately filed a new bill -- a largely symbolic gesture -- to repeal trade normalization. Dayton, a Democrat, joined in as a co-sponsor. "I cannot in good conscience support normalized trade with Laos so long as this regime continues to oppress the Hmong, arrest people arbitrarily, inhibit free speech and oppose religious liberty," Coleman said.

A two-year effort to normalize trade relations with the Communist nation was spearheaded by Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., whose St. Paul district has a large Hmong population.

"This is a historic step ending thirty years of isolating Laos," McCollum said. "We will now be engaging the Lao people in a positive relationship that can improve their quality of life and build a brighter future for their families."

Protests

McCollum introduced the bill in the House last year, after the Bush administration urged Congress to do so. Since then, her office has been the site of protests by Hmong-Americans who oppose the current Laos regime.

The Laos measure was part of a broader trade bill reducing tariffs on imported goods. The House passed the bill last month. The issue came before the Senate only after the House-passed provision was tucked into House-Senate negotiations on the tariff bill, avoiding a straight-forward vote on the Laotian issue alone.

"Frankly, folks did by night what they could not get done in broad daylight, and that's too bad," Coleman said.

The Laos trade provision forced him to vote against the tariff bill, Coleman said, which he would have supported otherwise. "This may be a protest vote by me," he said.

Coleman acknowledged, however, that he is going against a strong political current, with the White House supporting normalized trade with Laos.

As a palliative, Coleman sponsored a resolution condemning human rights abuses in Laos and expressing hope for a more open society there. The resolution was passed with the backing of Dayton, along with Wisconsin Senators Russ Feingold and Herb Kohl, both Democrats. Wisconsin also has a large Hmong population.

"We need to first address the real problems in Laos ... before we consider normalizing trade relations with this region," Dayton said.

Hmong divided

Supporters and opponents of normalized trade relations both claimed to represent the wishes of their Hmong constituents. The Hmong community itself appears to be sharply divided.

Wayne Saykao, an immigrant who runs a St. Paul travel agency, said he hopes normalized trade will help those left behind. "It will bring prosperity to the poor people in Laos and will also bring the two countries closer together," he said.

But opponents say trade will only strengthen Laos' repressive regime. "They will use trade to buy weapons to kill innocent people in Laos," said Thao Vang, president of United Hmong International, an immigrant group in Fresno, Calif.

In a speech last year in the Twin Cities, Gen. Vang Pao, a leader of the CIA-funded resistance against the Communists in Laos in the 1960s and '70s, changed his long-held views against trade with Laos, announcing that he supported trade if it improves that nation's human rights record.

Months later, shots were fired into the suburban home of Pao's translator, and an arson fire broke out in the St. Paul offices of the Lao Family Community Center of Minnesota, an organization funded by Pao. Another arson fire destroyed the home of Pao's son. The cases remain open and are believed to be related to the policy dispute.

Staff Writer Paul Sand contributed to this report.

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